



# NEWSLETTER

**SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF THE MILITARY**



## THANK YOU TO OUR SUPERHEROES AT MJFSVH

Please join us in thanking our nurses at the Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home during National Nurses Week!

"We're so thankful for all they do for our heroes," said SDDVA Secretary Greg Whitlock. "They exemplify commitment, compassion, and action."

Thank you superheroes Susan, MaryKay, Natalie, Wendy, Susan, Ann, Rachelle, Cynthia, Rochelle, Elaine, Nikki, MaGlynda, Mary, Teresa, Dawn, Carolyn, Bev, Mary, Angela, Jamie, Steve, and Victoria.



Your passion for our heroes' health is appreciated everyday. Thank you for being the amazing nurses that you are!

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# VA AIRBORNE HAZARDS AND OPEN BURN PIT REGISTRY

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) announced the [Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry](#) now exceeds 200,000 registrants.

The registry, which began in June 2014, allows veterans and service members to self-report their exposures and health concerns in an online questionnaire that can be used to initiate discussions of health concerns with a provider.

"Concerns about the long-term effects of exposure to burn pits remain a priority," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "By joining the registry, veterans, service members and the Department will further understand the impact of deployment-related exposures on health."

The Department of Defense encouraged registry participation in a letter to more than 700,000 active-duty, Guard, and Reserve members, which ultimately helped push participation beyond the 200,000 mark. In addition to completing a questionnaire, registry participation involves an in-person exam by a provider.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, most VA facilities are deferring exams to protect registry participants, medical staff and other patients.

To learn more about this [registry](#), including eligibility requirements click on the link.



# VA ENHANCES NATIONAL COVID-19 REPORTING SUMMARY TOOL

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced that it enhanced its [National COVID-19 Report Summary](#) website that provides a real-time look at the status of COVID-19 patients who have been tested or treated at VA facilities.

“The accelerating pace of the VA’s response to the national emergency required the VA to leverage the Department’s unique national data infrastructure and informatics capabilities to create a timely, automated biosurveillance process,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “The public-facing report displays all known VA COVID-19 cases that are tested or treated in VA facilities.”

As an integrated health care system with a common electronic health record, the VA can extract and compile information in near real-time from all its facilities. Several complementary approaches are then applied to this information to identify and validate COVID-19 cases. These approaches are subject to ongoing human review by clinical experts in infectious disease, public health and critical care to validate and refine VA’s approach.

The relaunched site divides COVID-19 case counts into the following categories:

- **VA COVID-19 cumulative cases** – Running total of all patients tested or treated at a VA facility for known or probable COVID-19. This includes veterans, employees and non-veterans.
- **Active cases** – Patients tested or treated at a VA facility for known or probable COVID-19 who have neither died nor reached convalescent status.
- **Convalescent cases** – Patients tested or treated at a VA facility for known or probable COVID-19 who are either post-hospital discharge or 14 days after their last positive test, whichever comes later.
- **Known deaths** – All deaths among patients tested or treated at a VA facility for known or probable COVID-19. The reference “inpatient” indicates the death occurred in a VA hospital; “known other” indicates the death was reported to VA but occurred elsewhere.

The VA is grouping active and convalescent cases into the following categories: veteran, employee, veteran-employee and all other which includes civilians admitted to VA hospitals as humanitarian cases, Tri-care patients, active-duty military and other groups.

The reporting tool reflects the most accurate and timely information that the VA can assemble at this time. The data represented is updated from the VA’s automated biosurveillance system every hour.

For more information, visit the [National COVID-19 Report Summary](#) website.



# VA EXPANDS ACCESS TO VIRTUAL HEARINGS

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Board of Veterans' Appeals (Board) announced it is expanding access to virtual hearings to all veterans awaiting their Board hearing after successfully testing the capabilities during the [last year](#).

Virtual hearings are a secure, confidential, and convenient option for veterans and their representatives to have their Board hearing held from a location of their choosing.

The Board moved quickly to put this option into place in response to COVID-19 and the temporary suspension of in-person hearings. For veterans who opted to have a hearing, choosing the virtual hearing will allow the Board to decide a veteran's appeal more quickly.

Virtual hearings became a permanent option for veterans, April 10, when President Trump signed the [VA Tele-Hearing Modernization Act](#) into law. To date, the Board has successfully held more than 640 virtual hearings and has the capacity to hold 250 per week. There are many openings on the virtual hearing docket for veterans and their representatives considering this option.

"Providing veterans the option to participate in their Board hearings from a location of their choosing is yet another way the VA and the Board are continuing to modernize," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "This option helps the VA ensure veterans continue to receive important benefits and services, especially in these difficult times."

## VIRTUAL HEARINGS



As always, we encourage veterans and county/tribal veterans service officers to work with our in-house, SDDVA appeals expert—Krystal Taylor. Krystal is well versed on the VA's policies and procedures and has been guiding veterans through their hearings/appeals.



# VA PARTICIPATING IN DRUG, PLASMA TRIALS IN FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced participation in a series of clinical trials and investigations across the nation aimed at finding ways to mitigate or potentially prevent symptoms of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in patients.

The trials demonstrate the ability of the VA — America's largest integrated health care network that also maintains a significant capacity for research — to work with government and industry partners on a wide range of solutions during this national health crisis.

"We're in a position to do things that no one else in the world can do to improve the health of our veterans, the nation and the world," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "The VA is bringing all of its expertise to bear during this crisis, and now we're leading the way on research into pharmaceuticals and treatments that could improve the lives of thousands of patients."

The VA's most far-reaching effort is its cooperation with the Mayo Clinic, which is studying whether blood transfusions from people who recovered from COVID-19 can help those who are still suffering with symptoms. Plasma from COVID-19 survivors contains antibodies that may help current patients.

In cooperation with this program, more than 60 of the VA's medical centers and clinics are prepared to perform transfusions of this plasma to COVID-19 patients.

The [Food and Drug Administration](#) approved expanded access to convalescent plasma transfusions in April. Patients who are interested in this program can [learn more here](#).

VA researchers are developing other clinical trials that will offer even more opportunities for veterans. Many are in the planning stage, and some are already enrolling volunteer participants.

VA medical centers in Denver, New Orleans, and Palo Alto, California have joined a clinical trial led by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases that is assessing whether drugs such as Gilead Sciences Inc., Remdesivir are effective against COVID-19. Veterans who want to participate can contact the VA in those cities or [learn more here](#).

In Atlanta, the VA is working with Regeneron Pharmaceuticals to assess whether Sarilumab, a drug normally taken to treat rheumatoid arthritis, may be an effective treatment. Veterans interested in this study can contact the Atlanta VA, and [read more about the trial here](#).

Additionally, the VA will soon launch a study in parallel with the Department of Defense to better understand the epidemiology and clinical characteristics of COVID-19. That study is being coordinated by the Seattle VA Medical Center, with assistance from researchers in Durham, North Carolina; West Haven, Connecticut; Boston and Palo Alto.

# **SD DEPARTMENT OF LABOR ACCEPTING CLAIMS FOR ADDITIONAL 13 WEEKS OF UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS**

The South Dakota Department of Labor and Regulation is now accepting claims for [Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation \(PEUC\)](#) which allows for an additional 13 weeks of benefits at the end of the regular 26 weeks of state unemployment benefits.

Workers who became unemployed as a direct result of COVID-19 may qualify for this unemployment assistance provision provided under the CARES Act. PEUC became payable for the week ending April 4, 2020, and ends the week ending Dec. 26, 2020.

## **CARES Act - Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation**

“You may be eligible if you have established a claim with a benefit year that ended after July 1, 2019, and you have exhausted all 26 weeks of state benefits or your benefit year has expired,” said state Labor and Regulation Secretary Marcia Hultman. “You should file a new claim at [RAclaims.sd.gov](#).”

The weekly benefit amount under PEUC is the prior weekly benefit amount plus the additional \$600 weekly payment provided for under Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC).

“PEUC claimants must file a weekly request for payment each week to receive benefits, even though the work search requirement is currently waived,” said Secretary Hultman. “You cannot file this request until the week is over on Saturday at midnight.”

PEUC benefits are 100% federally funded, as are the implementation and ongoing administrative costs. Employers will not be charged for any benefits paid under a CARES Act program.

Attempts to collect unemployment benefits after quitting a job without good work-related cause is considered fraud. The CARES Act specifically provides for serious consequences for fraudulent cases including fines, confinement and an inability to receive future unemployment benefits until all fraudulent claims and fines have been repaid.

# VA GETS BOOST FROM CARES ACT

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced that it has expanded support services enabled by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, to make available immediate relief for veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

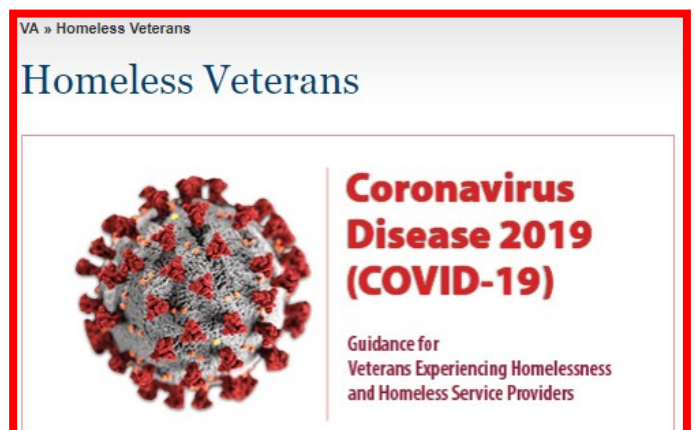
The CARES Act allocates \$17.2 billion for the Veterans Health Administration, \$300 million of which will be used this fiscal year to address the challenges faced by homeless and at-risk veterans.

“A significant percentage of homeless veterans or those at risk of homelessness are uniquely vulnerable to COVID-19 due to their living conditions, age and chronic health complications,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “The funds from the CARES Act are vital and will allow the VA to continue working diligently to prevent the spread of infection in communities and keep veterans safe and on the pathway to permanent housing during this perilous time.”

Funding is provided for three critical VA programs to assist with the emergency response needed for veterans living without safe, stable housing.

- [Supportive Services for Veteran Families Program](#) - \$202 million has been allocated to provide emergency housing and homelessness prevention assistance to very low-income veteran families to mitigate the expected wave of evictions and potential homelessness that will result from extensive unemployment. Funds for this program will also assist the [Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing](#) program in placing Veterans in safe housing to isolate them from the virus.
- [Grant and Per Diem \(GPD\) Program](#) - Grants from the GPD program usually consist of a capped per diem payment from the VA to community organizations to provide transitional housing and supportive services to veterans. \$88 million has been allocated to this program, which allows the VA to waive per diem limits during the crisis and help GPD grantees to provide all needed emergency housing and supportive services, including emergency placement for veterans who need to be isolated for their safety or the safety of others.
- [Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program](#) - \$10 million has been allocated to provide emergency shelter and supportive services during the crisis, including placement in hotel rooms for veterans needing emergency shelter or isolation to avoid spreading the virus. Housing will be paired with care, treatment, and rehabilitative services.

[Learn more](#) about how the VA is working to protect Veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic and the [VA's homeless programs](#).



# UPCOMING EVENTS

May 8—Victory in Europe Day  
May 8—Military Spouse Appreciation Day  
May 10—Mothers Day  
May 16—Armed Forces Day  
May 20—SDDVA Skype Mini Conference—10:00 am (CT)  
May 25—Memorial Day  
May 25—State Offices closed  
Jun 14—Flag Day  
Jun 21—Fathers Day  
Jun 27—DAV State Convention—DAV Headquarters—Sioux Falls  
Jul 6—Black Hills National Cemetery Unaccompanied Veterans Memorial Service—9:00 am (MT)  
Jul 10—VABHHCS VSO Congressional Forum—Bldg. 145—Room 108—Fort Meade VAMC—10:00 am (MT)  
Aug 22—Midwest Honor Flight—Mission 7  
Aug 24-27—SDDVA Annual Benefit School—Ramkota Conference Center—Pierre  
Sep 3—Veterans Day at the SD State Fair  
Sep 3-7—SD State Fair  
Sep 5—Midwest Honor Flight—Mission 8  
Sep 11—VABHHCS VSO Congressional Forum—VFW Post 1273—Rapid City—10:00 am (MT)  
Sep 19—Midwest Honor Flight—Mission 9  
Oct 10—Midwest Honor Flight—Mission 10  
Oct 26-30—National Summit on Women Veterans Issues (more information coming)  
Nov 13—VABHHCS VSO Congressional Forum—Domiciliary Auditorium—Hot Springs VAMC—10:00 am (MT)

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